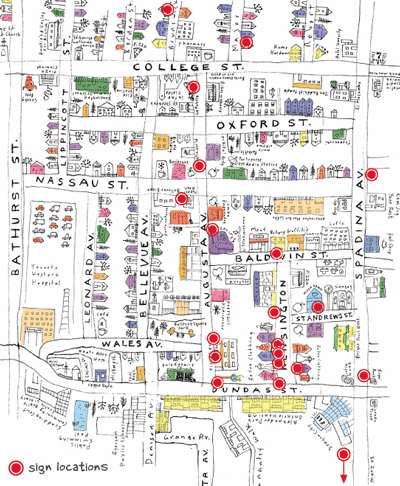
**The City**

I chose the theme of the city and urban life because of its immediacy with the lives of Toronto students and because the theme can be considered on many levels. It is also an engaging entry point for students from diverse backgrounds; many students living here have lived in a city or town other than Toronto as well, and this experience allows them to compare various aspects of city life, which can lead to rich learning for the class as whole. It encourages connections between the local and the global, and between the personal (the trappings of one’s day-to-day life) and the political (the systems, structures, and dynamics that shape these seemingly mundane events).

As someone who grew up in downtown Toronto, I am interested in exploring the complexities, benefits, and challenges of living in the city on multiple levels. On a global level, there are certain issues that are common among larger cities around the world; understanding these issues in terms of global capitalism and cultural imperialism well connects with enduring understandings of “Language is powerful,” and, more specifically, English as powerful in our current political moment. Exploring various aspects of Toronto, as a relatively smaller city within this context, brings us as learners into understanding our neighbourhoods and communities as a way to, as Freire writes, teach students to “read the world.” The texts in this set will include works that address urban issues in a general sense as well as Toronto-specific texts, in order to connect our specifics to global themes.

**Text 1: [murmur] toronto**



Murmur is a Toronto-based organization that brings oral history to the streets. The [murmur] sign of the green ear is nailed to telephone posts in nine neighbourhoods around the city, and each marker has a phone number written on it. The idea is that as a person stands at, for example, Spadina and Nassau (see image), they can call in and hear about a historical moment in time related to that particular location, as recounted by a community member who participated in the event; their story is told in the first person, from their personal perspective. The stories can also be accessed online. Each red dot in the image to the left represents a location with a story attached to it. The first [murmur] initiative began in Kensington Market/Chinatown, and there are now initiatives in Vancouver, Montreal, Calgary, San Jose, Edinburgh and Dublin.

**Rationale**

[murmur]’s multimedia approach to oral history is unique and engaging. There are various possibilities in terms of how to use and apply the resource for English students. Online access is easiest, and students can browse according to interest and neighbourhood (murmurtoronto.ca). There is also the option of taking students on a field trip to a specific neighbourhood, having students find the [murmur] marker and call in to listen to the story as they are standing in the place in which that moment in history took place. This would be rewarding and engaging to students on a whole other level. The activity also has a focus on listening, which is often less emphasized, especially in university-level courses.

**Text 2: *Kim’s Convenience***

*Kim’s Convenience* is a play by local theatre artist Ins Choi. The play revolves around a Korean-Canadian family that runs a convenience store in Toronto’s Regent Park. Through the Kim family’s interactions with customers and each other, the play reveals the hopes and frustrations of each family member and paints a portrait of intergenerational relationships that is rooted in contemporary Toronto. The work also casts a keen eye on Regent Park’s “urban renewal” project, questioning the process of gentrification as it is currently manifesting in the downtown core.

*Kim’s Convenience* began its life onstage at an event organized by fu-GEN Asian Canadian Theatre Company, and was first mounted at the Toronto Fringe Festival, where it won the best new play audience award. It is currently a Soulpepper Theatre Company production.



**Rationale**

Looking critically at the rhetoric of “urban renewal,” a euphemism for gentrification, is an essential contemporary connection that is directly relevant to the lives of both students living in the downtown core as well as students living in the suburbs and rural communities, as all of these exist in relation to one another. Regent Park’s redevelopment is a high profile example of the ways that governments and corporations displace marginalized communities in order to profit off of the rising cost of inner-city life. Schools across the downtown are bearing the brunt of this harmful process, as schools are shut down due to low enrollment because of increasing housing costs. Again, because these issues directly affect the lives of our students, we as teachers can find engaging ways to enter into these conversations—Kim’s Convenience makes the issues accessible by humanizing them, connecting these themes to immigrant stories with humour and complexity.

**Text 3: Multicultural History Society of Ontario**



The Multicultural History Society of Ontario provides numerous resources on the history Ontario in various forms. First, the society administers a library/archive that members of public can access as a reference. This includes print materials as well as video and audio archives including an array of primary source documents. Their Oral History Museum includes listening/viewing stations through which visitors can experience over 9000 hours of interviews and archival material with members of “60 ethnic groups now residing in Canada.” The society’s website, offers a range of resources on the history of various Ontario communities, including a taste of the interviews and other resources available through the Oral History Museum.

**Rationale**

The Multicultural History Society of Ontario is a little-known resource that is extremely receptive to school groups and other community members accessing their resources. The multimedia approach that the society takes to teaching about history is engaging and innovative, and the resources themselves speak to little-known history that can deepen students’ understandings of the neighbourhoods that they live in. The society’s approach can connect students to learning about the history of their particular ethnic community in Toronto and Ontario, also encouraging students of Anglo or Western European descent to become familiar with their ethnic identities in a context in which it is typical for these identities to be “invisibilized” as the benign norm. This awareness raising serves to de-center traditionally dominant narratives and instead create an environment in which learning and knowledge is truly “co-constructed” by all members of the learning community.

**Text 4: “Ain’t No Love in the Heart of the City”**

This song, written by Michael Price and Dan Walsh, was first performed by Bobby “Blue” Bland in 1974. Many artists have covered the song since that time. The song alludes to themes of urban poverty, although some readings and interpretations present it as a love song in more simple terms. Bland sings, “Ain’t no love in the heart of the city/Ain’t no love in the heart of town,” and bemoans the fact that a second person or quality (“you,” ostensibly his lover) is no longer there with him.



**Rationale**

This song would be very useful as a “Minds On”-type activity in introducing the theme of the city as a unit. For example, playing the song and then asking if students agree with the writer’s assertions. Students could use this as a springboard to talking about what defines the city, both in physical terms as well as in emotional, spiritual terms, as the song exemplifies. Using song and music as an entry into other poetic genres is also important in fostering student engagement and interpretation of text.

It could also be useful in encouraging students to think critically about the social issues that the writers refer to in the song and to identify local and contemporary examples of these issues. This could also enter into an exploration of specific literary themes in relation to the city, as identified by the students.

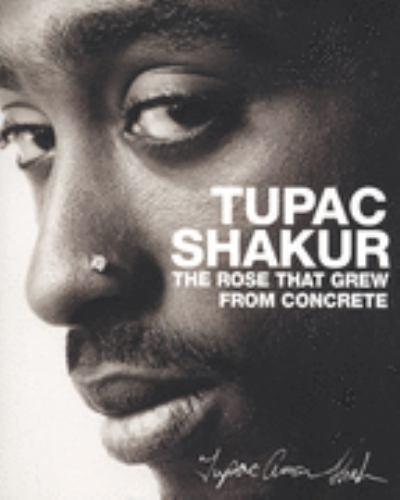
**Text 5: “In Paradise”**

“In paradise” is a poem by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, a prolific poet, writer, and professor of English and Women’s Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara. In it, she speaks to themes of gendered harassment and violence in the city; the poem opens with the line “’Don’t take the short cut,’” a warning by one woman to another. The “poetic I” takes the shortcut nevertheless, but events en route force her to revert to the safer, more circuitous route in the end.

**Rationale**

Violence and violence against women are key themes to interrogate in the exploration of urban issues. Geok-lin’s poem conveys the normalized and insidious nature of the violence inherent in our every day lives. But is this a result of urbanization? Is urbanization an exacerbating factor? The city is often depicted as a hotbed of crime, as inevitable in geographic areas that are dense and diverse in terms of population. But crime itself, not to mention the sensationalization of urban crime, is symptomatic of systemic issues that must be unpacked in order to understand the true nature of the problems at hand. Are there differences in the quality of violence in the city versus violence in rural or suburban areas? What are these differences? Asking students to critically examine these questions will result in literary interpretations that go beyond superficial and stereotypicalreadings of the city.**Text 6: “The Rose That Grew From Concrete”**

Tupac Shakur’s “The Rose That Grew From Concrete” is a song that speaks to similar themes as “Ain’t No Love” (text 4), but perhaps with more hope. “Long live the rose that grew from concrete/when no one else seemed to care.” Tupac Shakur’s lyrics celebrate the strength of the individual in overcoming hardship, and the image of concrete is generally associated with urban development and the dearth of warmth in the inner city.



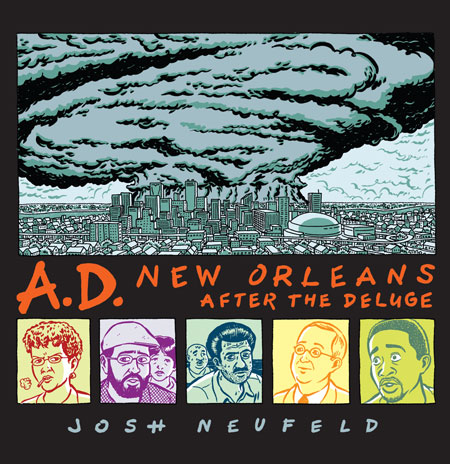
**Rationale**

Hip hop is another entry point for students who might be “turned off” by more conventional forms of poetry or narrative. As a distinctly urban genre, the medium itself also speaks to the theme of the city; the song could connect into a sub-theme/unit on the roots of hip-hop as connected to the socio-political themes discussed in other entries. The song conveys a message of hope and speaks to the strength and resilience of people dealing with multiple barriers and marginalization. This could lead into an assignment or activity that asked students to identify a song or other text that gave them strength and helped them remain hopeful in times of challenge.

One layer to add to the interpretation of the song is around the difference between individual and collective/community strength, and how these play out in experiences of oppression and marginalization.

**Text 7: *A. D. New Orleans After the Deluge***

In the graphic novel *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*, cartoonist Josh Neufeld tells the story of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath through the stories of seven characters, all of whom are based on real-life individuals. Drawing on interviews with these primary sources, as well as on his personal experience volunteering for the Red Cross after the flooding, Neufeld offers a cinematic and heartbreaking narrative rich in story and dialogue. The characters are diverse in terms of gender, race, class, and reactions to the Hurricane and the subsequent flooding. The stories themselves reveal the horror of the neglect and abuse that New Orleans’ most impoverished residents suffered at the hands of the state in the aftermath of the flooding.

**Rationale**

Discussing Hurricane Katrina brings up a host of social justice issues related to urbanization, class, and race. While catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina are often depicted as “natural disasters,” the true catastrophe lies in the systemic and institutional response to the disaster. As in earthquake in Haiti, or the earthquake and nuclear disaster in Fukushima, natural disasters dramatically expose the failure of contemporary social infrastructures (rooted in a capitalist, patriarchal social order) in providing for people’s most basic needs. In situations of urgency, human suffering is exponentially exacerbated due to the oppressive nature of the institutions that are supposed to protect its constituents. Understanding the city and its relationship to the state in politicized terms is essential to understanding one’s social location as a resident of “the city.”

**Text 8: *Last Train Home***

Chinese-Canadian filmmaker Lixin Fan’s documentary *Last Train Home* centers around the story of the Zhang family, whose family home is in rural China. They are migrant workers who visit home once a year during Lunar New Year, or Spring Festival, as it’s known in China. Through their story, Fan explores the plight of the more than 130 million Chinese migrant workers who work in China’s urban centres. This vast displacement represents a troubling global economic reality that becomes even more stark when their 16-year-old daughter leaves home and school to become a migrant worker herself. . The Zhang family’s story ultimately centres on the story of the eldest daughter, who is frustrated by life in the village with grandma and younger brother. She is “failing” in school. She longs to go to the city and by the end of the documentary, she is working in a nightclub in one of China’s most notorious border towns, Shenzhen.



**Rationale**

Fan’s documentary would be engaging and useful in the English classroom on many levels. It provides students with a global perspective on urbanization. Some work would need to be done in the classroom to connect the Zhang family’s story with the students’ everyday realities. This could be done by identifying, for example, goods that are labeled “Made in China.” Why is it that so many of these goods, goods that we can buy at the dollar store, are so inexpensive? In fact, there is a high human cost to these “cheap” products. The story of the eldest daughter would in many ways be relevant to Toronto students, and would engage as a narrative of intergenerational conflict and the tensions between self-determination and family obligation.

**Text 9: The Toxic Tour of Toronto**

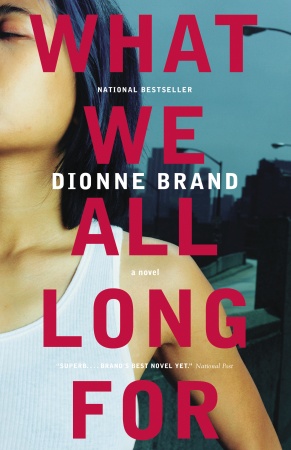


The Toxic Tour of Toronto, held intermittently by Mobilization for Climate Justice, is a free public walking tour of downtown Toronto that is designed to expose the corporations responsible for the detrimental effects of Canada’s extractive industries on the global environment. MCJ’s website notes that Canada is an international leader in the mining and extractive industries, as 75% of these corporations are based here. The tour visits locations and sites related to the industry and to other Toronto environmental justice struggles.

**Rationale**

As a hands-on educational activity, a walking tour of Toronto would put locations of interest in socio-political context, challenging students to think critically about the layers of meaning that are embedded in the physical geography of the city. It would encourage their speaking and listening skills, and expose them to the concept of environmental justice in a concrete and accessible way. It would also allow students to make cross-curricular connections between themes of ecology, sociology and history with the themes of urbanization as they would be surfacing in the literary texts presented.

**Text 10: *What We All Long For***



Dionne Brand’s *What We All Long For* is a contemporary story set in downtown and suburban Toronto, as well as locations related to the international roots of the five main characters. The diasporic realities of so many people living in Toronto are celebrated and explored in Brand’s compelling work. This work is essential to a “Toronto canon,” so to speak, as it portrays the complexities of life in the city today with grace, humility, song, and never condescension.

**Rationale**

I remember first reading *What We All Long For* in 2006 and thinking, “This is a story about me and my friends.” It was only once I read it that I realized how deeply I had been missing stories that reflected my realities growing up here. I wept as I read, with recognition and a sense of validation—through this story, I was reminded that my voice as a writer was worthy. Students of all backgrounds would relate to the text on various levels—Brand addresses universal themes through the specific experiences of racialized characters. Of the many Toronto-based novels and stories in existence, I have yet to see one that so broadly and sensitively depicts the complexities of the contemporary Toronto experience. Of course Brand is one of Canada’s eminent writers—as a poet, novelist, and theorist she has received countless national distinctions.